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SCIENTIFIC ETHICS AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS.

It is an extraordinary phenomenon of scientific ethics that it should have ignored the significance of Christianity. Historically there has been no more potent moral force in occidental society than the church, and, whatever may be the value of other religious systems to the Orient, the great teachers of right conduct in Europe and America have been the preachers of the gospel. Yet there is almost no treatise on scientific ethics worthy of serious consideration in which Christianity is accorded any weight. Even when a writer like Paulsen is led to notice Christianity as a historical fact, he discusses it as if it were a branch of asceticism or a matter of antiquarian information. Nor does scientific ethics merely ignore Christianity; some of its representatives explicitly declare the ethics of Christianity to be defective.

And yet, while thus overlooked by the scientific writer, thousands upon thousands of men are preaching and teaching an art of conduct which is supposed by them, at least, to be taught by Jesus and his apostles. And the ethical conceptions socialized by them and their predecessors, as a matter of simple history, have been a large element in the evolution of scientific ethics itself.

The reasons for this paradoxical situation are numerous. As fundamental as any, however, it may be, are these :

1. Modern ethics is dominated by an evolutionary conception which looks to a historical development of the origin of the authority of conscience. Having long ago abandoned the idea that there are certain things which, regardless of all relationships, are absolutely right or wrong, scientific ethics is convinced that, from a study of different physiological, economic, social, and other phenomena, it is possible to trace the growth of the feeling of obligation which constitutes the basis of morality; and sometimes, indeed, goes so far as to hold that in thus tracing the history of morality it has discovered its origin as well.

2. Scientific ethics is essentially systematic. In Christianity it sees no evidence of system, but rather a collection of practical aphoristic principles controlling certain aspects of moral life. These, however, it would call merely the Hebrew or Christian contribution to a developing ethical system, hardly coördinate with the contributions of Greece; for these include not only principles of conduct, but formal systemization as well.

3. Scientific ethics regards Christianity as something which makes toward the minimizing and repression of life; in a word, that it is ascetic. Its representatives definitely state that the Christians of the New Testament period were ascetics engaged in mortifying the flesh, regarding this world as a vale of tears, a veritable grave.

4. Scientific ethics commonly holds that Christian ethics makes righteousness depend upon a pleasure-pain theory of reward and punishment. Men are thought to be taught by Christianity to do right for the sake of heaven, and to avoid wrong for the fear of hell. With such a theory as this no ethical writer of the first rank today can possibly be in sympathy.

5. Perhaps as much as anything, however, is the objection raised to the Christian system of ethics in that it is based upon some phase of external supernaturalism. The drift of ethics today, if we except men like Martineau, is not toward theism,

but, if not toward a substitution of morality for religion, at least toward the establishing of ethics upon an independent basis, leaving philosophy to adjust its relations with religion. A system of ethics such as Christianity is generally supposed to be, in which one does God's will simply as it is known from a book or from a church or from some other external source, is naturally rejected, especially by such writers as see in God himself only a new phase of the ever-changing *ego*.

Far be it from us to deny that there is force in these objections, but not one of them represents any fair knowledge of the New Testament. Unless we mistake, the only justification which scientific ethics can claim for its hostility to, or the utter neglect of, Christianity is simply this—it *does not know what the ethics of Christianity is*. It is not altogether its fault that this is the case. The fact is that few Christian preachers have distinctly presented the real ethical heart of Christianity. It almost seems as if from the time of Jesus himself the great effort of the church has been to avoid the gospel of liberty which the Master preached. Paulinism itself, the *bête noire* of scientific ethics, has been quite as much, though for precisely opposite reasons, the object of suspicion on the part of Christians. Where scientific ethics sees authority and asceticism, orthodoxy, in all its transformations, has seen anti-nomianism and license. Speaking broadly, in all of its great historical forms Christianity has turned from "the liberty wherewith Christ has set us free," and attempted to establish an authority external to the man himself and operating, not through the personality, but upon it—such as an infallible church, an infallible pope, or an infallible creed. Therefore it was inevitable that the ecclesiastical interpretation of the ethics of Christianity should have been nothing other than a more or less euphemistically disguised Torah of Moses and an Oral Law of Pharisaism, often inferior to the work of the rabbis it assumed to replace.

And thus the present situation has arisen. It may as well be put frankly. If the present ethical literature is any evidence

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of the tendency ethical thought is taking, Christianity, if it is hereafter to have any share in the development of scientific ethics, must be restudied from the ethical point of view, and it must be studied properly. To bring together a number of texts, commands, and ideals, and to insist, as almost all books on so-called Christian ethics do insist, upon an external authority, is simply to widen the breach between ethical thought and this alleged Christian thought.

*CONDITIONS
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It is only when the New Testament teaching is approached in the spirit of the historian that we can obtain its essential ethical teaching, for this is expressed in the vocabulary and the thought-concepts of another age. These must be accounted for, and, so to speak, rendered achromatic. The problem involves the following considerations :

1. There must be an accurate and sympathetic discovery of the particular currents of thought, both Jewish and Græco-Roman, which controlled the expression of the fundamental elements of Christian ethics.

2. There must be a correspondingly keen recognition of that which actually constitutes the essence of the Christianity of the New Testament.

3. In the presentation of the Christian ethics these two must be distinguished sharply, and whatever was the intellectual form into which Christianity was run must be distinguished from Christianity itself. Once thus distinguished, the form assumed by the New Testament teaching becomes the first historical phase of Christianity itself. Historical study must here be something more than the use of antiquarian illustrations.

And here is a new opportunity for the biblical theologian. When once the proper distinctions are made, Christian ethics has little to learn and much to teach. If there is anything clear in the New Testament, it is that Jesus and the apostles regarded as the essential thing life, and not the words which describe life. And this life of the individual, itself determined by its relations with society and God, is the source of the ethical

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ETHICS*

imperative. One's great duty is to live. We could wish our friends, the scientific ethicists, would understand this. Any man who thinks that Jesus or Paul was an ascetic, or who thinks that the chief obligation set by Christianity is the abusing of the flesh, or who thinks that the ethical imperative of the New Testament is to escape hell, does not know what the ethics of the New Testament is. Before he finally decides that Christianity should be reduced to a footnote, or even to an archæological chapter, he would do well to understand the New Testament. At the present moment it is somewhat difficult to point to a satisfactory exposition of this ethics, but one of these days some expositor will make plain that Jesus and Paul have some clear word to say upon most ethical problems—heteronomy and autonomy, the source of the ethical imperative, the ethical significance of the relations of the individual and society, the basis of moral distinctions, the highest good. It may be this teaching of Jesus and Paul will not be revolutionary ; it is certain that it will not be unqualifiedly Hegelian ; but it will be practical, and, what is more, it will be that which in the future, as in the past, will determine the conduct of millions of men and women ; nay, we even venture to believe, it will determine the conduct of the champions of scientific ethics themselves.